

'Johnny Applesced of the Oquirrh's' Nurtures the Mountains

Paul Rokich, who grew up in the shadow of the devastated slopes, has spent his life reclaiming the land's natural glory

BY PAT BEAN

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OQUIRRH MOUNTAINS — His lifelong quest to bring the devastated northern range of the Oquirrh Mountains back to life has earned Paul Rokich a legendary title — Johnny Applesced of Oquirrh.

Today, the 65-year-old tree planter has the deep pockets of a millionaire. Behind him are the efforts to revegetate the landscape denuded by decades of mining, overgrazing, logging and fires.

Rokich started his restoration effort when he was just a teenager. Funds for seeds and plantings came from his own pockets. When money was not available to buy seeds, Rokich collected them from nature, or grew oak seedlings from acorns in home containers.

"The mountains called to me. It was the work I feel I was put on Earth to do. To not do it would have made me feel like I was cheating my mother," he said.

Much of Rokich's seed sowing was done within sight of Kennecott Copper operations. But over the years, Rokich has strewn seeds from one end of the mountains to the other.

I can't remember my wife's birthday, but I still remember every tree I planted ... and there have been thousands, and thousands," he said.

In the early years, before environmental reclamation became popular, Rokich's reseeded ef-

forts were rarely appreciated. He was regularly punished by Kennecott guards who didn't want him trespassing on company property.

To avoid the guards, Rokich, carrying a 5-gallon bucket of seeds, would start his planting excursions in the dark.

"I timed the hikes so I could be out of reach, high up on some steep ridge by the time the sun came up," he said.

"Finally, the company figured it would be cheaper to hire Paul than to continue chasing him away," Kennecott spokesman Louie Coronados said. That was 25 years ago.

Rokich said the official job didn't change his life much, except allow him to drive a pickup to his work.

But there are still days when he'll park the truck and head up the hill on foot to personally check out each plant in sight.

Along the way, he might even throw out a few penstemon seeds, or plant a small tree in a niche that catches mountain runoff.

"Before I know it, it's dusk, I'm halfway up the mountain and so tired I can hardly move," he said. This day, Rokich checks out a briar patch in Black Rock Canyon in sight of Kennecott's tall smoke stack. He created the thorny patch so the cottontail rabbits he

loves would have a place to escape hungry coyotes like the fat one eating a chuckar on a nearby hill.

Rokich watches the coyote while meadowlarks sing in the background and green alfalfa and wildflowers wave in the wind. The delightful meadow is a reclaimed gravel quarry that was used by the state to provide fill to rebuild Interstate 80 when the road was damaged by flooding in the 1980s.

Rokich said he came into the meadow one winter day to find a cougar feeding on an elk. It had killed, an eagle swooping down to snare a bite of the elk, while a coyote was leaping into the air trying to get at the eagle.

"I remember when even a lizard couldn't exist here," Rokich said although Kennecott usually gets all the blame for destroying the Oquirrh, the company had a lot of help.

Loggers overharvested the forests, sheep overgrazed the grasses, steam engines rolling past set the landscape on fire, and then toxic smoke filled with sulfuric acid from the Kennecott copper smelter poisoned the last blade of grass that grew on the northern end of the range.

Rokich was born in the shadow of the smelter when it still spewed out its poisonous smoke.

His father, who worked at the giant smelter, died when Rokich was about 11, and from then on he was the man of the family.

Over the years, Rokich worked numerous jobs. He picked tomatoes, worked construction, did greenhouse work and at one point even owned a landscaping business.

Until a construction accident put him off his feet for a year, he was also attending classes at the University of Utah, where he became a protégé of botanist Walter Cottam.

Cottam, a critic of actions that had destroyed the northern Oquirrh, once said grass would never grow there again. But Rokich convinced him otherwise.

And in 1960, when Kennecott was still chasing Rokich off its property, Cottam wrote the company requesting that his student, "who had already planted several hundred trees and shrubs in the area at his own expense," be aided in his dream of restoring the north face of the Oquirrh.

Rokich never made it back to college but he continued his agronomy studies on his own. His research unearthed an article about the then relatively unspoiled Oquirrh written by famed naturalist John Muir. Using Muir's descriptions of his hike

during the 1870s, Rokich has retraced Muir's path through the Oquirrh.

Like many who view the Oquirrh from below, Muir at first was not impressed. But he changed his mind after hiking into them and coming across a field of lilies. The flowers were sego lilies, Utah's state flower.

Rokich said sego lilies are blooming again in the Oquirrh. The lilies are among the plants Rokich has reintroduced in the mountain range.

These days, Rokich spends part of his time helping reclaim Kennecott's mine tailings and planting trees along the company's entrance off state Route 201.

"Soon, this will be the most pleasing approach to Salt Lake City there is," Rokich said, pointing to a newly planted row of trees along the roadway.

But the Oquirrh still dominate

his thoughts.

"I check them out daily," he said as he watches a herd of elk feeding on thick grasses. The meadow they are standing in, he said, was where a flash flood, unimpeded by vegetation, once roared down into Magna and killed a young boy.

"This year, with all the rain we had, there wasn't a single flooding problem. All the structures that were built to hold back the water don't work as well as just having vegetation on the land."

Rokich said reclaiming the barren Oquirrh was easier than he thought it would be.

"Reclaiming land doesn't take a lot of money, just a lot of sweat. I thought I'd be dead 50 years before anyone realized what I had done here. But visitors are already coming to see the results. And since everything I did here," he said, pointing around him, "was done with the future in mind, it can only get better."

The thought put a smile on Rokich's face.

"So now they can send me to hell. I know if they give me six weeks, I can have grass growing there, too."

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